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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [IZ](#)

SUBJECT: IRAQ: TALK AROUND BAGHDAD ON THE KRG PM QUESTION,  
TALABANI SUCCESSION

Classified By: Acting Deputy Political Counselor John Rath for reasons  
1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In meetings during October-November, Kurdish contacts in Baghdad provided useful insight into who might replace the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Prime Minister, though none could provide a clear answer. Additionally, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani's advisor Aram Yarweissi discussed preparations for Talabani's eventual exit from politics. End Summary.

¶2. (C) It first hit the news in late summer that KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani - Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) - would be forced to step down at the end of 2007 to be replaced by someone from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) under a power-sharing deal between the two major Kurdish parties struck when they merged their governments in January 2006. The Kurdish diplomatic circuit since then has been rife with speculation on potential outcomes. Many thought Nechirvan would remain PM and were unsure what he would do if he quit. Some speculated that he would take over the business side of the Barzani family operation or even move abroad. Some thought the dispute between KDP leader Masood Barzani's son Masrur, the KDP intelligence chief, and Nechirvan (Masood Barzani's nephew) made it more likely that he would leave.

¶3. (C) Most agreed that Nechirvan is an effective prime minister who had attracted much investment and promoted the Kurdistan region. All agreed that he holds enormous power. Interlocutors mentioned Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Barham Saleh (PUK) as the mostly likely replacement, but most seemed uncertain about what ultimately would occur. Ala Talabani (PUK), niece of President Talabani, appeared resigned on November 4 to the eventuality of a PUK member replacing Nechirvan, but lamented that removing Saleh from Baghdad could harm Kurdish interests here. Most contacts said they approved of Saleh's performance in Baghdad, although some, such as local PUK leader Sadoon Shafi, criticized Talabani and Saleh for not doing enough for the Kurds. Two advisors to DPM Saleh and President Talabani offered particular insight on this Issue.

DPM Advisor: Nechirvan Probably Staying

¶4. (C) DPM Saleh advisor Lawen Hawezy, in a meeting with Poloffs November 2, scoffed at the idea that anyone could challenge Nechirvan for the premiership, saying he was too connected and too strong to leave it. He had also demonstrated the ability to bring prosperity and outside investment to Kurdistan, Hawezy noted. He thought current KRG Deputy PM Omar Fatah (PUK) was unlikely to be given the job, nor was current Kurdistan National Assembly speaker, Adnan Mufti (PUK). Hawezy expressed a low opinion of Fatah, but he described Mufti as a good man who sees both sides of an issue and is willing to negotiate. Unfortunately, this more moderate stance has prevented him from being truly

powerful in the PUK, but it has earned him a measure of respect, Hawezy said.

¶15. (C) According to Hawezy, DPM Saleh is still mulling over his options, although he suggested the nomination is there for the taking should Saleh want it, assuming the PUK decided to replace Nechirvan. Describing factors in Saleh's calculus, Hawezy said Saleh likes his current position and sees himself as a leader for all of Iraq. Saleh is ambitious, he said, and being in Baghdad positions him nicely for future opportunities. He, unlike many of his contemporaries in the KRG, speaks fluent Arabic and has worked with all parts of Iraqi citizenry.

Talabani Advisor: Talabani Prefers That Nechirvan Remain  
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¶16. (C) Talabani's preference is to keep Nechirvan, who he thinks has performed well, Talabani's advisor Aram Yarweissi said, although he would not say that Talabani had made a decision. In Yarweissi's opinion, Nechirvan has not had enough time to really execute his program as PM - he assumed his position less than 2 years ago. Yarweissi thought Nechirvan should be given time to finish all of the good things he started. He also speculated that, should the handover occur, a new government probably would not be in place until April 2008.

¶17. (C) Yarweissi told Poloff Nov 4 that there are six potential candidates from the PUK politburo that are vying to replace Nechirvan for PM, but, in his view, none are acceptable. Many are members of the so-called Old Guard of the party - essentially those that have been party members since their days in the mountains as peshmerga. These men

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were resistant to change, thoroughly corrupt, and incompetent, he said. Yarweissi opined that, if the PUK was to replace Nechirvan, it needed an equally impressive candidate.

¶18. (C) He, like many others, thought Saleh would not want to leave Baghdad to take the job, though he admitted that part of Saleh's calculations include planning for his eventually succeeding Talabani as general secretary of the PUK. He said Saleh's rivals for post-Talabani primacy understand that a good performance as KRG PM, combined with its opportunities for patronage, could solidify Saleh's position as heir apparent. This may stimulate attempts from within the party to prevent him from assuming the position, he thought.

Independent Candidate a Possibility  
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¶19. (C) Another possibility was to nominate an independent candidate, Yarweissi stated. An independent candidate would bring a fresh, non-partisan perspective acceptable to all sides, he said. There are several possibilities, but Yarweissi identified Talabani's personal physician, "Dr. Nismadoon," as the most likely independent candidate. He said Nismadoon is well connected to both major Kurdish parties, having previously been the personal physician of Mustafa Barzani, father of current KRG president and KDP leader Masood Barzani. He is a successful businessman with a "multi-million dollar" medical practice and is politically savvy and capable, according to Yarweissi.

Talabani Prepping Party for His Retirement  
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¶10. (C) Yarweissi said Talabani has already begun preparations for his retirement. He expects that Talabani will be through with Iraqi politics after his term as Iraqi President expires in 2010. He may even retire from the PUK at that time as well. Yarweissi has already noticed changes in Talabani's behavior. In the past, Talabani handled most

of his correspondence personally - up to 200 letters daily - but lately he has shifted this task to a team of subordinates in Sulaymaniyah, Yarweissi said. He also noted that when Talabani led a delegation to the United States in September-October he referred most decisions along the way to KRG Vice President and PUK deputy secretary general Kosrat Rasul Ali. Yarweissi said this was his way of beginning to condition the party to operate independently, without relying on him for direction. Asked if this was in any way meant to prop up or appease Kosrat, Yarweissi said no, he was merely the second most senior official in the delegation. He said Talabani prefers Saleh to succeed him as PUK leader, though he will not overtly anoint Saleh as the heir apparent.

¶11. (C) Yarweissi also contrasted the Kurdish attitude toward discussion of Talabani's health five or six months ago when Talabani first fell ill and was evacuated to a clinic in Jordan, and now. He noted that then it was taboo and impolite to discuss PUK succession or Talabani's retirement, but now not only is everyone discussing it, but they feel comfortable broaching the topic even with Talabani.

¶12. (C) Comment: It may be easier for Talabani to avoid rocking the boat (both within his party and in his relations with the KDP) by allowing Nechirvan to remain PM. At the same time, he may calculate that such a move could be seen as weakness to his party members, particularly rivals like Nushirwan Mustafa, who openly oppose him. Saleh is the x-factor, but will follow Talabani's direction. It appears that even the highest levels of both KDP and PUK have yet to decide. That the PUK and even Talabani are openly talking about succession and making post-Talabani preparations is encouraging. It suggests that, assuming he lives long enough to reach consensus, there will be a plan in place that could help maintain stability in northern Iraq.

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